



Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Grandfamilies, or kinship families, are those in which children live with and are being raised by grandparents, relatives or other adult extended family members. Grandparents play an important role in providing safe and stable homes to children who cannot remain in the care of their parents. Due to a parent's substance use disorder, death, disability or military deployment, grandparents can provide a continuum of care ranging from childcare to taking full responsibility for raising their grandchild.

The numbers and characteristics of grandfamilies in the U.S.

According to the U.S. Census, in 2016, 2.5 million grandparents were responsible for the basic needs of one or more grandchildren under the age of 18 living with them.¹ There were nearly 6 million children under the age of 18 living in a household maintained by a grandparent in 2016. Of those 6 million children, nearly 2.6 million were under age six.²

While there is great diversity within these family groups, some grandparents are more likely to be raising their grandchildren than others. Grandparents who live with their grandchildren tend to be:

- Younger
- Less educated
- More likely to be divorced or widowed
- More likely to be in poverty
- More likely to be unable to work due to illness or disability.³

In addition, grandparents raising grandchildren are represented at higher rates among Black, American Indian and Alaskan Native racial and ethnic minority groups, though rates have been increasing among White, non-Hispanic grandparents.^{3,4}

Why are grandparents raising grandchildren?

Grandparents take over responsibility for the care of their grandchildren due to a variety of parental difficulties and stigmatizing family events including abuse and neglect, incarceration, physical and mental illness, death, military deployment, deportation, adolescent pregnancy, divorce and abandonment.⁵ Economic instability has also been associated with growth in multigenerational households.⁴ Parental substance abuse, whether as a result of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, or today's opioid epidemic, has long been cited as one of the most common reasons that grandparents raise their grandchildren.⁶

Challenges and stressors

Researchers have found that grandparents face numerous challenges that contribute to adverse physical and mental health outcomes. Commonly reported stressors include poverty or economic distress,⁷ the lack of a legal relationship to the grandchild,⁸ inadequate housing⁹ and social isolation.¹⁰ Strained family relationships may be another source of stress, and include marital distress¹¹ and conflict with the grandchildren's biological parents over the nature and extent of their involvement with the grandchildren.¹²

THE HAZELDEN BETTY FORD FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE

The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation understands the many ways families can be impacted by addiction and offers a number of support services to help families learn healthy coping skills. Through phone-based coaching sessions with a licensed addiction counselor, our Connection™ for Families program provides support to family members in need of their own recovery support. Our Family Programs offer education and guidance through presentations, discussions, guided goal-setting and fellowship with other family members affected by addiction. The Caring Family Group is offered monthly and is free of charge at Hazelden in Plymouth and St. Paul, Minnesota, locations. This is a place to gain support and encouragement, and discover new insights and addiction recovery resources.

CONTROVERSIES AND QUESTIONS

Question: Where can grandparents find help?

Response: Grandparents may want to join a support group for people with family members who have addiction and substance use issues such as Al-Anon Family Groups (al-anon.org). Al-Anon also has Alateen groups for children whose parents have substance abuse disorders. The Children of Alcoholics Foundation (nacoa.org) has resources on their website to help relatives raising children of parents who are addicted. Grandparents may also want to get personal counseling from a therapist who can help both grandparents and grandchildren learn how to cope with substance abuse in the family. Generations United (gu.org) offers many resources, and Grandfamilies.org (grandfamilies.org) is a national legal resource for grandfamilies.

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

Grandparents: Despite the challenges you may face as a family, children fare well in your care. It is important that you seek services that can help you cope with your family circumstances. Use this information to help recognize and meet your needs and the needs of your grandchildren.

Service Providers: Recognize that most grandparents cherish their grandchildren and want what is best for the child. While many strengths, challenges and needs are shared by diverse grandfamilies, the level, length and types of help they need can vary. Networks of aging services agencies and other community supports can play a critical role by providing help to families headed by older caregivers.

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There is consistent and substantial research evidence that grandparents raising grandchildren experience significant levels of depression.^{13, 14, 15, 16} These rates of depression have been shown to be higher than those of single parents and those of the general population.^{17, 18}

Impact of grandparent caregiving on child well-being

Despite many challenges, children fare well in the care of their grandparents. Compared to children not cared for by relatives, they have more stability, are less likely to run away and are more likely to report feeling loved.¹⁷ When children cannot remain with their parents, placing children with grandparents or other relatives reinforces safety, stability and well-being; reduces trauma; reinforces a child's sense of identity; helps keep brothers and sisters together; honors family and cultural ties; and increases the likelihood of having a permanent home.¹⁷

Importance of supportive services for grandfamily success

When caregivers in grandfamilies are offered supportive services, the social and mental health outcomes for the children involved improve substantially.¹⁸

Examples of key support services include:

1. Information and referral assistance such as kinship navigator programs^{18, 19} that provide a single point of entry for learning about housing, household resources, physical and mental health care, and financial and legal assistance.
2. Physical and mental health care for older caregivers and children including programs covered by Medicaid and Medicare. Quality counseling and trauma-informed mental health services have been shown to improve outcomes for both caregivers and children.²⁰
3. Affordable legal services so that grandfamilies, whether they are inside or outside the foster care system, can access a continuum of legal relationship options and understand both the legal and practical differences of adoption, guardianship and legal custody.
4. Lifespan respite programs that provide coordinated, community-based respite care services for family caregivers who provide care for children and adults with special needs.
5. Financial support services, including access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Social Security retirement, disability, and survivor benefits for both the caregivers and for the children; and Supplemental Security Income for low-income caregivers and children who are disabled.

Conclusion

Grandparents raising grandchildren are important resources to their families and communities. Finding ways to assist and help grandparents raising grandchildren is critical to supporting some of the most vulnerable families.

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